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LETTRE MENSUELLE SUR L'ÉVANGÉLISATION

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Sevak I.T. Yesusahayam, who is an evangelist in the country of the Veddahs, the aboriginal people of Ceylon, has written this personal witness in this form in order to illuminate the truth that the evangelist is not one who works for Jesus Christ but one who works with Him.

The Mission to the Veddahs of Ceylon

By God's providence, and under the auspices of the Church in Jaffna, the Christa Seva Ashram was established in a small village called Maruthanamadam in the Jaffna peninsula in North Ceylon. Every Friday, at the Ashram, during the hour of intercession, prayers went up for two of the most cherished aims of the founders. One was that the Ashram should produce labourers of a new kind for the Lord's vineyard, and the other was that the Lord should make possible a mission to the Tamil speaking Veddahs in East Ceylon by the workers of the Ashram. (The Veddahs are the aboriginal people of Ceylon.) Praise the Lord, the first of these aims was very soon achieved, for workers trained at the Ashram were privileged to carry the light of the love of Christ to many parts of Ceylon. But the second project had to be postponed for some years on account of a dearth of workers. Finally, on the 14th April 1953, I was appointed for this work at a special service where the brethren and friends of the Ashram were present. Brother Goodchild assisted me for some time. Both of us lived at first with Mr. S.Karthigesu, a Methodist evangelist, and visited the adjoining Veddah settlements, made friends with the people, held meetings, attended to the sick and prayed over them and generally got to know the area and its people. As these settlements were over 20 miles away from our temporary house, we decided to move to a place much closer, and that is how we came to live in our present home.

Here we find a fair number of Veddahs, who have given up their nomadic type of life and who, together with some Tamils and Muslims, have settled down to do farming. Their main occupation is paddy cultivation, but their subsidiary activities include chena cultivation, hunting,

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and collecting wild honey. Some, who live near the sea, fish as well. Their language is a dialect of Sinhalese and Tamil in which Tamil predominates. There are small schools in some villages. Some worship Hindu gods, while others worship their ancient gods and devils which are said to demand various forms of sacrifice. They believe that these will protect their crops from destruction by wild animals, protect them while hunting, help them to be better marksmen, and keep them generally in good health. It is customary for them to consult their gods and devils before embarking on some work of an important nature. They do so through the medium of a priest and an attendant. For example, if somebody is ill, they ask the gods and devils to find out whether that illness can be cured by a doctor or should be cured by exorcism. The priest shouts out something while in a trance and an attendant, also in a lower degree of trance, gives meaning to these words. Sometimes people bring the sick to these persons and they sprinkle saffron water over them. Some of the sick have told me that they have been instantly cured. The people live in a morass of ignorance, poverty, superstitions, intemperance and immorality.

Though at the early stages they looked on us as their enemies, now they consider us their friends. They listen to the message of the Gospel which is conveyed to them with the help of pictures and filmshows. They request our prayers for the sick and when the sick recover they put a thanksoffering into our till box. Still, however, they are reluctant to call Jesus their Lord and Master. They consider it a sin to cut themselves away from tradition. Nevertheless, the Love of Christ is consistently and persistently seeking them.

Here are a few significant experiences:

a. There was a house in an adjoining village, which used to burn suddenly. We were invited to help. It was 7 a.m. when we went there. On the previous day it had caught fire eleven times. On that day there were a number of people with water and sand ready to do the needful if it burned again. We made some crosses with the tender leaves of the coconut palm and hung them all round, sang a hymn, read I Peter 4:12-19 and prayed. For three days there was no fire. On the 4th day, they invited a devil charmer and carried out a purification ceremony. Within a few hours the whole house caught fire and was burnt to ashes.

b. There was a teacher, a man of great experience, who went about asking people not to welcome us into their homes. As he was returning from one of these missions, his boat capsized and it was with much difficulty that he was able to come ashore. On the next day, he took the school children to the Hindu Temple. As he was returning a coconut fell on his head and in a few hours he was dead. Thereafter, we never had any opposition either secretly or openly.

c. One day while I was alone, a mother came running with her baby which had stopped breathing. The baby was being given some medicine when this happened. I took the baby in my hands, made the mother to kneel down and prayed to Jesus, the Friend of children to heal that child. As we prayed the baby took a deep breath and began to breathe. We both praised God.

The mother returned with five five-cents coins and put them into our till and said "I shall bring some more offerings to your Jesus God."

d. One night I returned late after a tiring day among the neighbouring villages, but I could not find the box of matches to light a fire to cook some food. It was impossible to go and buy a box of matches for the nearest shop was eight miles away. So I prayed and went to bed hungry. After a few minutes I heard somebody call me. I saw a young man who had a parcel for me from a friend. This man had come a distance of one-and-a-half miles to give me that parcel in the dark. It contained some sweet-meats and fruits. I ate them and went to bed glorifying God.

e. On another occasion at about 4 p.m. a young man who lives with me came and told me that there was no food for the night. I told him that there was a long time more for dinner. At about 5 p.m. a boy came with a present of eight measures of rice from a Hindu landowner in the neighbourhood. A few weeks later there was insufficient room for me to store the paddy from our fields. So I sat down and wrote a hymn of praise and thanksgiving to the Lord.

f. About twice each month, I travel eight miles on a bicycle and then twenty miles by bus to conduct services and singing lessons in the Methodist churches in Batticaloa. Once I did not have sixty cents for my bus fare, so I had to stay two days in Batticaloa. According to our discipline we are not expected to ask for help. On those two days I visited the homes of many Christians and had six sumptuous meals and eighteen cups of tea. On the third day I decided to walk to my home and got ready. Just then I had a message that somebody wanted to see me urgently. I went to see him and he gave me tea and plenty to eat and also twenty-five rupees with the words, "I don't know whether your travelling to Batticaloa for work is paid or not. Please use this money for travelling." When God calls, He also sustains.

g. The place where we live is infested with poisonous snakes. We have accidentally trampled on them several times. Once an old man who visited us sat down on the verandah to find that he had sat on a snake. On another occasion in the dark I lifted a snake from my table. A few months ago, just before our chief Sevak (elder brother, we call him) left for Australia, he stayed with us a few days. We thought of moving out some old bricks, and discovered two snakes and five young ones living close to us. There was only a distance of a yard between us. In 1954 a snake bit one of the boys who had come to attend the dedication of our Chapel. Dr. Paton was with us at that time and he performed some first aid and we all laid our hands and prayed over him. Nothing untoward happened to him. He was just as hale and hearty the next day as he was the previous day.

Such miracles that have occured in my life have dispelled the doubts that were created during my theological study of Chapter 16 of St. Mark's Gospel. The 91st Psalm is our favourite Psalm.

> "He that dwelleth in the secret place of the most High
> shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty."